MORE THAN 9.2 MILLION AMERICANS TELECOMMUTE, A

NUMBER EXPECTED TO TRIPLE IN THE NEXT 15 YEARS.

Making Telecommuting

HERE ARE THE PROS AND CONS OF TELECOMMUTING AND A

DESCRIPTION OF A TRAINING PROGRAM TO GET PEOPLE READY TO

TELECOMMUTE, PLUS TIPS ON SETTING UP AN OFFICE AT HOME.

It's Monday morning and the start of a new workweek. ▸ In New York City, the HR executive committee of a large telecommunications firm is discussing how they will comply with revisions of the 1990 Federal Clean Air Act which require decreased employee commuting for all companies with over 100 employees.

▸ In California, a mid-sized, high-tech company is developing its own

BY GEORGE M. PISKURICH
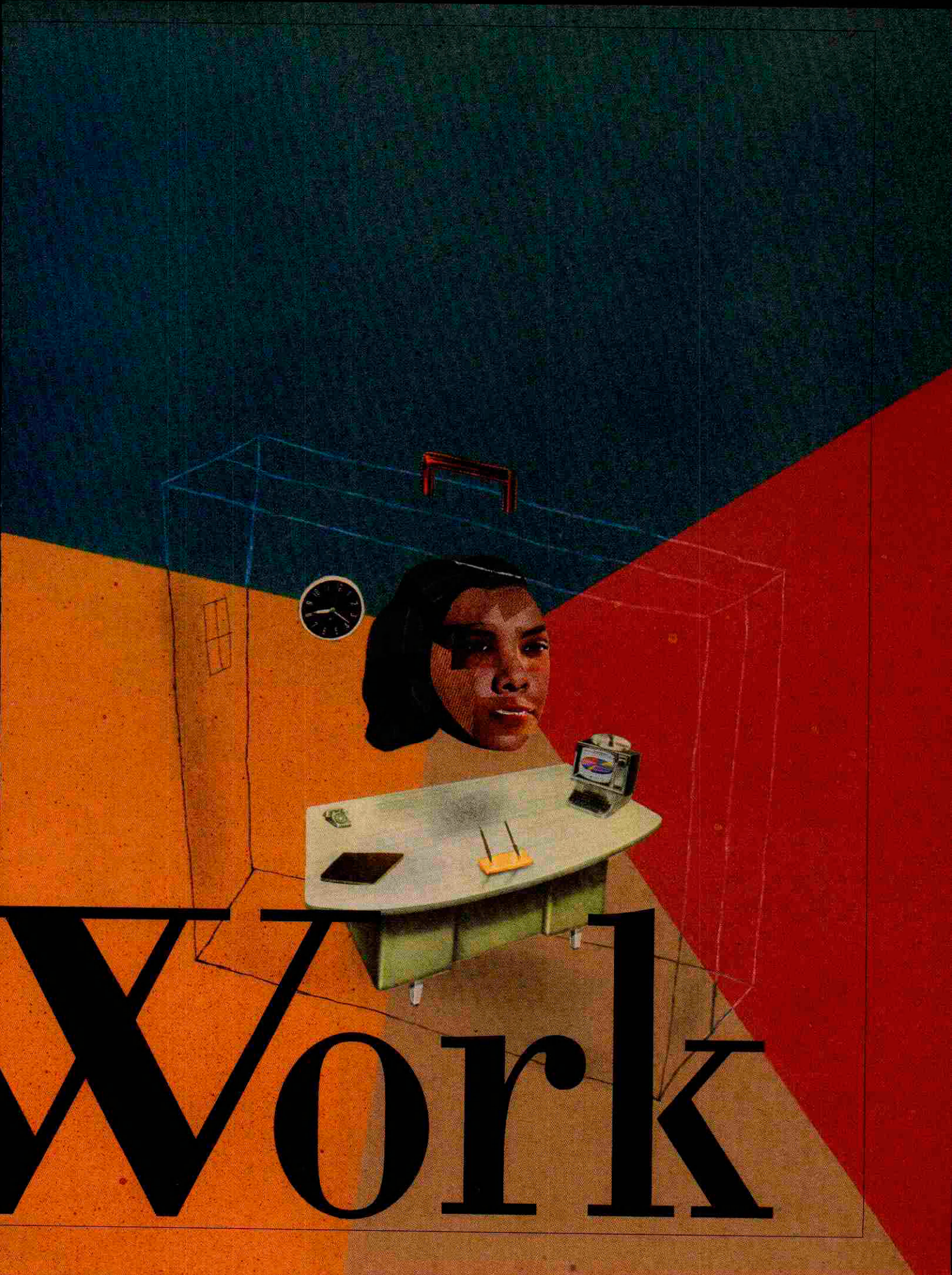
Work

compliance plans for that state's even tougher air quality standards which mandate a reduction in employee trips to work.

▶ In Atlanta, a fast-growing company is concerned about the cost and availability of new office space.

▶ And in Chicago, another HR department listens to complaints from employees about traffic jams caused by freeway repairs and criticism from their supervisors about tardiness and decreased productivity.

Why telecommuting?

What these and many other companies with similar problems have in common is that they are all exploring telecommuting as a possible solution. They see telecommuting as a way to help them meet government air pollution regulations, comply with ADA accommodation requirements, reduce operating costs by decreasing office space, and increase employee satisfaction by eliminating long commutes. As a by-product they also expect increased productivity from employees who aren't exhausted from fighting traffic, leaving early to "beat the rush," and who are working when their bio-clocks make them most effective.

Organizations seeking a competitive advantage in everything from better customer service to reduced turnover are considering and, in many cases, trying telecommuting. In recent surveys, 60 to 70 percent of the companies polled offer or plan to offer some type of telecommuting option to their employees. In the communications field that number is 80 percent, and in higher education 90 percent.

The actual number of telecommuters is hard to determine because defining what constitutes a telecommuter is problematic. Some surveys suggest that there are more than 7 million telecommuters in the United States, with 750,000 in California alone. This number does not include people who are self-employed and work at home. These individuals are not considered telecommuters as they normally have no other office to be telecommuting from.

While the number of telecommuters comprises less than 2 percent of the workforce, it is growing, possibly as much as 15 percent a year. One multinational communications organization has announced a goal of having 20,000 telecommuters in place by the end of the decade. Estimates of 11 to 15 million telecommuters by the year 2000 may actually be conservative as more and more companies of all sizes begin to realize the benefits of telecommuting.

Advantages and disadvantages

Some of the benefits of telecommuting have already been mentioned. A more comprehensive, though by no means exhaustive, list is provided in the box on this page. This list has been divided into business, employee, and community advantages, though some obviously overlap.

These advantages also translate into real dollars. The average office space savings per telecommuting worker can be as high as $8,000. Companies are saving two dollars for every dollar invested in telecommuting. One company documented a savings of $80 million in 1994, simply in office rentals.

In terms of productivity, studies suggest that telecommuters can outperform in-office workers by as much as 16 percent. A significant portion of this gain is from being able to custom design a work schedule. Telecommuters who are morning people don't waste their most productive hours trying to get to the office. And those who are evening people don't need to leave for home just as their productive time is beginning.

Another reason for increased productivity is fewer interruptions from telephones, meetings, and colleagues.

Some telecommuting advantages can be a two-edged sword. For example, fewer people in the office means less need for office space, but also less flexibility in a crisis. The box on page 23 lists disadvantages of telecommuting. A number of these disadvantages are the flip side of the advantages, and proper implementation can significantly decrease or eliminate their effects.

Misconceptions about telecommuting are a major disadvantage. Some employees regard it as a substitute for day-care services, or a chance to get away permanently from the office and its problems. Neither of these perceptions fits the reality of telecommuting.

Managers often believe that telecommuting will cause them to lose control of their employees, or will re-

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TELECOMMUTING ADVANTAGES

For the company
Helps attract new employees, especially those who need flexibility
Can increase retention rates
Helps in ADA compliance
Complies with various EPA regulations
Reduces sick time and absenteeism
Increases productivity
Increases employee job satisfaction
Maximizes office space
Decreases relocation costs
Reduces overtime

For the employee
Reduces transportation costs and commuting time
Allows personal control over working conditions (temperature, music, etc.)
Eliminates unplanned (unproductive) meetings or "drop-ins"

Provides more flexible child and elder care options
Increases privacy
Reduces the stress of commuting
Allows work to be done when one is most productive
Reduces clothing costs
Creates more time to spend with family
Enhances communications with supervisor
Provides the ability to work without interruption

For the community
Decreases the environmental impact of commuting
Conserves energy
Decreases traffic congestion
Reduces the need for road repair
Takes pressure from public transportation

duce the need for managers. Many think that departmental communications will suffer, and that the employees will slack off.

In reality, telecommuting can increase the importance and responsibilities of good managers. It usually leads to better communications, and it consistently results in employees who work harder so they can keep their telecommuting option open. However, a decision to offer telecommuting should not be made without a thorough examination of how these misconceptions, and the other disadvantages as well, will affect the telecommuting program.

A review of advantages and disadvantages is only one step toward successful telecommuting. Many telecommuting programs fail because the decision to implement them seems so simple and logical that not enough time is spent planning them.

Defining telecommuting

One of the first and most critical decisions in planning a telecommuting initiative is to define what it means for the company. Definitions for telecommuting range from simply working at home to the more complicated combination of flexiplace, flexitime, and electronic communications.

Telecommuting may include aspects of other alternatives to traditional office arrangements. One definition of telecommuting may be based on job sharing, another on flexitime, a third on compressed workweeks, while a fourth combines all three. One thing that telecommuting is not, however, is a way to turn employees into independent contractors. Beyond the legal ramifications, a telecommuting initiative with this objective is almost certain to fail. A company that expects telecommuting to reduce employee benefits expenses will soon find itself with new problems, including some interesting discussions with the IRS.

All aspects of what might constitute telecommuting for a company need to be considered before a definition can be determined and agreed upon. The definition is the cornerstone of the telecommuting initiative, so it should be detailed enough to provide the boundaries of the telecommuting

> ■ *Many telecommuting programs fail due to a lack of planning* ■

process. Don't make the mistake one company did by defining telecommuting as "not commuting."

Target populations

Another factor to consider during planning is the telecommuting target population. Is it large enough to give a return that warrants the time and energy that will be invested in the process? Companies have found that only 15 to 25 percent of those eligible will volunteer for telecommuting. Involuntary telecommuting is not something that any business should ever consider, except in dire circumstances.

Once a definition and a commitment to attempt telecommuting have been agreed upon, the next step is to develop the telecommuting policy and procedures that will guide the initiative. These policies and procedures should reflect the advantages that the company and the employee can expect to gain from telecommuting. They provide the framework for the specific processes within which the telecommuters and their managers will function. At a minimum, they should include the following:

▶ a statement of why the company supports telecommuting
▶ an agreed-upon definition of telecommuting for the company
▶ a list of the most important benefits of telecommuting for the employee, company, and community
▶ the criteria that will be used to se-

DISADVANTAGES OF TELECOMMUTING

For the company
Decreases direct control of employees
Reduces face-to-face supervisory meetings
May be abused by employees
Decreases corporate flexibility in emergency situations
Creates problems with off-site mechanical breakdowns
Demands greater coordination
May decrease the amount of communication
Is only suitable to certain jobs
May create psychological problems for the telecommuters

For the employees
May create a sense of loneliness and isolation
Can lead to cabin fever
May create a lack of respect or jealousy from fellow workers
Can lead to workaholism

Can provide distractions that interfere with work
Offers less access to copiers, fax, and other office services
May cause "invisibility" which can be bad for one's career
Creates mail handling problems (in both directions)
Diminishes participation in the office culture
Can create a sense of never getting away from the office
Creates situations where things you need have been left at the office
Eliminates the private office, and the feelings of comfort and status that come with it
Can produce higher household utility bills

For the community
Can lead to possible job and revenue losses

the primary cause of failure for most telecommuting initiatives.

Good communications and effective training that helps select and prepare the right people for telecommuting is paramount to the success of the process. Telecommuters who have not been well prepared can find themselves to be incompatible with telecommuting or frustrated by not being able to get what they need to do their work. They often become less rather than more productive. As an example, after the Los Angeles earthquake, the state of the freeway system caused Pacific Bell to initiate a telecommuting program. Later, most of the telecommuters voluntarily returned to the office. The main reason cited for their return was a lack of preparation and training.

A telecommuting training system

Effective telecommuting training can be divided into five components. While different in purpose, these components are closely related and usually developed simultaneously.

The first component is a communications program that introduces the process of telecommuting to the organization. This program can be as simple as a memo or as complex as a videotape production. One company found an audiotape that commuters listened to in their cars to be a particularly effective tool.

This introduction describes telecommuting based on the company's definition and telecommuting policy. It includes items such as:
‣ advantages for the company
‣ advantages for the employee
‣ positions within the company that are best for telecommuting (see box on this page)
‣ disadvantages
‣ common questions
‣ information on how to proceed if interested.

This program receives wide distribution; everyone in the telecommuting target population, their managers, and all higher-level administrators are possible recipients. It is particularly important that the latter two groups participate because their support will be critical to the success of the process.

lect possible telecommuters
‣ a list of what the telecommuter will be expected to do and not do in a work-at-home environment
‣ the administrative aspects of the program such as responsibility for telephone, office supplies, and household expenses
‣ HR issues that may differ in the telecommuting environment
‣ the types of equipment and software that will be necessary, and how they should be obtained
‣ how the home office should be set up to best support the employee and ensure company security
‣ miscellaneous information specific to the company's needs such as security, support services, and so forth
‣ information on what the employee and manager need to do to get the telecommuting process started.

The importance of training

At this point, the company's HRD department becomes crucial to the telecommuting process. Its responsibility is to take the policies and procedures and translate them into a coordinated communications and training process that will pave the way for successful telecommuting.

Preferably, the HRD department will have been involved in the process from the beginning, when advantages are discussed, definitions created, and procedures written. This involvement will significantly shorten the program design time and create more effective training.

The pressure to begin realizing the benefits of telecommuting for the company and the employees is usually intense. This impatience to begin is often enhanced by space problems, leases running out, or other economic factors. When all of these factors are added to what often appears to be the simple process of having people work at home, it's easy to see how the communications and training aspects of a telecommuting implementation can be neglected or ignored. This neglect is

Suitability and commitment

A second training component, designed for those employees who have expressed an interest in telecommuting based on the introduction program, helps them explore the reality of telecommuting and their suitability for it.

A psychological profile is part of this process. It starts the participants thinking about what mental and emotional characteristics make a good telecommuter, and what their own comfort level might be in a telecommuting environment.

Some form of simulation that gives a taste of telecommuting is also important in this part of the training. This might be anything from a written simulation to actually networking the trainees on their computers and having them do such everyday telecommuting processes as calling in, checking voice and phone mail, and accessing and sharing files.

Another aspect of this phase of training is an in-depth discussion of telecommuting advantages and disadvantages for the participant. Items that should receive special emphasis here include: dealing with demands from relatives and neighbors while working at home, the importance of itemizing and setting deadlines on work to be delivered, staying in touch with co-workers, addressing concerns about the loss of office and workplace visibility, and managing career development.

Personal advantages and disadvantages should be recorded by each of the participants as a summary of information they will need to help them make their final decisions.

Another series of items that participants can record on this document are their personal strengths and weaknesses in relation to telecommuting. See the box on this page for some traits of successful telecommuters.

The final step in this part of the training is to have the participants express their commitment to telecommuting, if that is their decision. This is usually accomplished through some type of contract, and is best done with the telecommuter's supervisor present.

The contract or commitment states how the telecommuter plans to func-

TRAITS OF SUCCESSFUL TELECOMMUTERS

Successful telecommuters should be:

Good planners
Self-motivated
Strong communicators
Task-oriented
Able to manage their workload effectively
Aware of their personal work style preferences
Able to work among family members
Flexible
Not just looking for an escape from the office
Committed and responsible
Able to ask for feedback
"Doers," not procrastinators
Able to work independently, with minimal supervision

Able to work without continual input and support from others
As comfortable eating lunch alone as with "the gang"
Able to leave the work behind when it is time to end the day
Able to negotiate work time and prevent interruptions from family and friends
Able to miss office gossip
Realistic about what can and can't be done
Able to adapt readily to new situations
Trustworthy
Good time managers
Proven producers of quality work
Able to focus on priorities and meet deadlines

■ Help your employees explore the reality of telecommuting ■

tion in the telecommuting environment, and what support he or she will need from the supervisor and the rest of the office staff. It can be as simple or as complicated as the company and the individual feel is necessary. Items such as schedules of availability, office days, supervisory and office communications plans, and how phone and mail will be handled are often found in these documents.

The contract has three main purposes: to indicate that the individual is ready to commit to telecommuting, to set out the plan by which this will be accomplished, and to document who is responsible for what in this individual's telecommuting environment.

Manager training

A supervisor's support is critical to the success of the telecommuter. If a lack of proper training is the main reason that telecommuting initiatives fail, poorly prepared managers and supervisors run a very close second.

Managers need to believe in the effectiveness of telecommuting, and they must know how to implement and manage it correctly. More than 50 percent of the companies that responded to a recent survey indicated that the lack of management's understanding and involvement was the greatest detriment to successful telecommuting.

Because they are directly involved in the contract and commitment aspects of preparing telecommuters, managers and supervisors should receive their own telecommuting training well before this process takes place.

Telecommuter skills training

The fourth component of a telecommuting training program is designed for those who have made the commitment to become telecommuters. This might be labeled telecommuting skills training. The following areas need to be covered:

▶ Telecommuting policies and procedures: Here the details of how the company sees the telecommuting process working are discussed, and the contract revised to reflect procedural changes.

▶ Getting started: The how-tos of obtaining equipment, setting up a home office (including ergonomics, second phone lines, space, privacy, and safe-

TELECOMMUTING PREDICTIONS

This year 9.2 million Americans will telecommute, according to a recent study by Link Resources Corp., a number that experts say will triple within the next 15 years. In the October, 1995, issue of *Wired* magazine, the editors polled five experts to look at the future of telecommuting. Among their predictions:

▶ In order to minimize employee isolation and bureaucratic ineffectiveness, adapting to individual lifestyles will take a backseat to getting people out in the field to better respond to customers.

▶ A "virtual water cooler" may emerge with the advent of affordable desktop, full-motion videoconferencing.

▶ Especially in the world of finance where minutes can mean millions, hand-held telephones that allow for global roaming will proliferate.

▶ "Virtual corporations" will not be entirely virtual; physical real estate will still be required for meetings and communication centers and classroom space for training.

SETTING UP AN OFFICE AT HOME

Here's what you can expect to pay to set up a typical office at home.

Furnishings
Workstation: Computer table, desk, printer stand—$400 to $600
Chair—$100 to $300
Chair mat—$30
Lamp—$40
File cabinet, four-drawer—$200
Bookcase—$150
Desk accessories (stapler, tape dispenser, desk pad, in/outboxes, and so forth)—$80

Technology
Monitor: 17-inch—$800;
15-inch—$500
Main unit and keyboard: Pentium—$2500; 486—$1900;
16Mb RAM, CD-ROM, 14.4 modem, Macintosh—$2400,includes monitor

Mouse pad—$7
Printer-laser b&w—$800;
color—$600; b&w—$400
Software—$495 (negotiate for an upgrade with a dealer)
Disk drawers/holders—$30
Surge protector—$50
Phone: two-line, conferencing—$80
Answering machine—$50
Fax machine: plain paper—$650;
regular—$300
Extra phone lines: data—$22 installation, $200 per month;
Voice—$70 installation, $17 per month, plus a per-call charge.

Reminder
Make sure your work space has enough electrical outlets with sufficient current.

By: Carol Brown, ASTD staff

ty requirements), getting on the company network, and starting phone and voice mail, are described.

▶ Computer brush-up: Most telecommuters will need to use computers and should be computer literate, and this is where any special tricks or necessities are covered. Everyone is either brought up to the minimum level that will support telecommuting, or is recommended for additional training.

▶ New software: Often there will be new software needed for the telecommuting process, particularly in the areas of networking and communications. Information on how to use it, or resources on where to go to learn, are given.

▶ Other hardware: Beyond computers there is certainly a need for phones, and possibly for fax machines, scanners, copiers, shredders, surge protectors, and other equipment. Need, set up, and use are discussed here.

▶ Support: Where and how to get it

and what to expect are discussed.

With this training completed, the participant is now ready to begin telecommuting. All that seemingly remains is to set up the home office and get started. However, there is one more aspect to a good implementation.

Non-telecommuter training
Often overlooked, with disastrous results, is the training of employees who are not telecommuting. As they form the basic support structure for the telecommuter, their understanding and support are extremely important. This is basically a communications process, and is often best handled by a well-prepared supervisor in a group meeting attended by both the telecommuters and their in-the-office colleagues.

Some of the topics to be covered were addressed in the introduction to the telecommuting program, and simply need to be restated if everyone in the group attended. Other topics will be very specific to each individual work group and supervisor. It is important to the success of the initiative that the telecommuters not be left out on their own. This part of the training, plus follow-up group discussions on how the process is working, will help ensure that this does not happen.

Telecommuting problems
Even with proper preparation and training, problems will still arise during telecommuting implementation and with individual telecommuters. At the very least, there are possible problem areas that need to be monitored. These include:

Home-office problems: These might include a greater need for work space than was first predicted, feelings of isolation or cabin fever, non-work disruptions, and the inability of the telecommuter to discipline him- or herself to work effectively .

In-office problems: Includes the forwarding of office mail, receiving phone messages, and availability of desk space on office days.

Supervisor/telecommuter communications problems: Too little, too much, or the wrong kind of communication between a telecommuter and supervisor can all cause difficulties.

Invisibility problems: This can include

missing office parties or not even being sent an invitation to them, not being available for impromptu meetings, lack of consideration for special assignments, and generally not being part of the everyday flow of the office, from gossip to work-related discussions with colleagues.

Jealousy: Some employees who don't telecommute may feel that the telecommuters are not working, or, at least, not pulling their fair share at home.

Guilt: There are telecommuters who deep down are not sure that working without putting on business clothes and going to an office is really working, or who feel guilty about not having to commute to work.

Lost office and status: The lack of a personal and personalized office and the status that comes from doors, windows, and other symbols can affect a telecommuter, particularly when he or she must work in a shared cubical on in-office days. The belief that being on the fast track, or having access to the boss are not possible for telecommuters can undermine the telecommuters' sense of well-being.

In the final analysis, telecommuting is not the simple panacea for thorny business problems that many organizations envision. It is, however, a work strategy that can increase productivity and decrease overhead costs for large and small companies, while helping reduce air pollution and creating a healthier environment for everyone. With careful planning, good training, and conscientious monitoring, telecommuting can be effective. ∎

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THE RIGHT STUFF

There's a ton of techno-gear for telecommuters and home-office workers to choose from. Mainly, you're looking for equipment that's easy to transport, combines several capabilities, and doesn't take up too much space. Or, maybe you'd just like some cool stuff. Here's a sampling.

▶ OfficeJet. This neatly contained box is a combined ink-jet printer, plain-paper fax, and copier (full and reduced sizes). $959. Hewlett-Packard: 800/752-9000.

▶ PN60. A watch manufacturer has developed the smallest, most lightweight printer currently available. The one-pound device is laser-quality with color capability using the optional color cartridge. $339. Citizen: 800/477-4683.

▶ Eris. This portable videoconferencing tool runs on a PC or Macintosh and includes a color camera and data base for storing the names, numbers, and even photos of your colleagues and clients. $5,000. RSI Systems: 800/496-4304.

▶ VideoMan. Now, you can conduct business face-to-face at a distance, using this color digital video camera for personal computer. Just set it next to your monitor and focus it on anything you'd like to broadcast to your videoconference cohorts. The VideoMan is OK for women, too. $279. Logitech: 800/231-7717.

▶ Adventure 4000. This gizmo will make callers think you have a big operation. The 486 computer serves as a receptionist by answering the phone and taking messages. It can also transfer callers to any of 99 voice-mail boxes. Other capabilities include a fax and a speech-to-text function for remote retrieval of addresses and phone numbers. $2,000. AST Research: 800/876-4278.

▶ Ringmouse. The infrared, ultrasonic portable mouse is here. Wear it on your right or left index finger, point, and control your computer's cursor with the two buttons. $99. Spectrum/Kantek: 800/536-3212.

▶ AER Energy Power 220. This cube-thing is just the thing when your laptop or cell phone runs out of juice while you're on the run without any extra batteries. It works by a rechargeable zinc air cell that inhales oxygen and exhales electricity. $649. AER Energy Resources: 800/769-3720.

▶ CelDock. Just place your Motorola MicroTACH flip phone into the cradle and—presto!—a second phone line. It works like a regular phone line, except that calls are transmitted through the cellular network. The CelDock also recharges the phone's battery so it's ready to go when you are. $399. Telular Corporation: 800/636-3625.

After the beeper.... It's the age of the pager. Sophisticated versions now have small LCD screens that show numbers and messages (including e-mail) and notify you when you've received a fax or voice-mail message. Some page services will also forward faxes to you, such as FaxNow through PageNet. Two-way pagers on the horizon—such as Motorola's Tango—will acknowledge incoming messages with any of 120 programmed messages.

And look for Microsoft robot-builder Gordon Bell to create a videophone/laptop/camera that will serve as a link between home and on-site workers. Bell refers to this technology as "telepresence"—or "being there without really being there."